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Why Arab Summitry is Fizzling: *Sub-Regional Geopolitics Meets the New Global Reality of Rising Powers and Fragile States*

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Introduction

It is tempting, given the tortured history of intra-Arab or pan-Arab politics since World War II, to view the theatrics of the recently lackluster annual Arab Summit through the historical prism of national Arab leader grandstanding in order to appeal to wider, transnational Arab and Muslim sentiments. For instance, the spectacle of Jordan's reigning President and monarch immediately flying back home to Amman after not being met at the Qatari airport by Qatar's own top leader is hardly unique; other historical instances exist of spats over the height of flags or the niceties of diplomatic prestige. And the Cold War failure of the aborted United Arab Republic, wherein Syrian and Egyptian nationalism clashed head-on, as well as the proxy war between Nasser's secular nationalist Egypt and Saudi Arabia's Islamic state in the form of Yemeni civil conflict, certainly indicate that "pan-Arab nationalism" has never achieved a truly unified stance.

Nonetheless, this author contends that larger regional-cum-global structural patterns have been emerging for at least fifteen years now that are directly challenging Arab and Muslim international and transnational politics in the Middle East. Specifically: sub-regional geopolitical divisions that have always existed are being exacerbated and fed by the simultaneous, Janus-faced global trend of "rising powers" alongside "weak, fragile, and failing states." The result is an increasingly strong, opinionated, independent, and defensively encapsulated grouping of Arab oil monarchies (the GCC), as well as a redefined Turkey, surrounded by a sea of state fragility throughout the rest of the Arab world.

Consider the strategic globalized environment within which GCC Arab states are acting. Turkey has equally correct relations with all its neighbors, no matter what their cultural or ideological composition: Israel, Iran, the European Union (EU) and Arab states all enjoy good relations with Ankara, even as Turkey is a formal member of NATO. India has been competing with China for oil contracts in both Sunni fundamentalist Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite fundamentalist Iran, has constructed a major Iranian port facility in the Southern Gulf, and is helping Iran build transportation networks for more oil/gas on Iranian territory, even while India also has strong anti-terrorism and conventional defense ties with Israel and the United States. And India, like China and Japan, is avidly courting all GCC states for purposes of finance, trade, and energy security.

In short: we are entering a globalized age of diverse forms of opportunistic cooperation between states and regimes of all types, rather than a system of competing, well-defined blocs based upon utterly hostile ideological world views. The middle, rising, and major powers of the world all have a strategic shared interest in making the global economy work for everyone, even as they may not always overlap in cultural values, regional geopolitical circumstances, or institutional

memberships. This is reflected in the fact that the G20—the group that informally manages the global economy through regular meetings of central bank managers and finance ministers, which has now been catapulted to the top of nascent global governance mechanisms – is constituted by the G8 plus South Africa, South Korea, China, Australia, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and the EU. The practices of these seemingly disparate nations signal a definitive end to an international security order that is based on clear divisions between state-level friends, allies, and enemies based on clear ethno-linguistic, religious, or ideological blocks such as the Arab League.

In particular, while the Levant struggles with ongoing civil conflicts (Lebanon, Gaza, West Bank), trans-border conflicts (Syria-Lebanon; Syria-Israel; Lebanon-Israel), and Western clientilism based on a rapprochement with an Israeli state that is vastly unpopular with the “Arab street” (Egypt, Jordan), the Gulf has been soaring in financial and military prominence at the global as well as sub-regional levels. In particular, there has been a de facto moving of financial, military, and even religious-spiritual power to the Gulf after the initial, post-World War II, Cold War emphasis on the Levant. The rise of political Islam has thrown into doubt the state identities of Egypt and Syria, while grave domestic dangers have been created by the “buying off” of Egypt via huge foreign aid infusions based up on the Camp David Accords, similar to the international status of Jordan after the recognition of Israel as part of the failed Madrid Process. The more distant GCC states, meanwhile, have been able to adopt the stance of mediators and peacemakers who are neither slavishly friendly to Israel (based on dependence on U.S. aid) nor utterly hostile, as seen in both Saudi and Qatari peace initiatives involving various Levant parties over the past several years.

Meanwhile, global energy (in)security and the ever-more-thirsty rising manufacturing powers of Asia (Southeast Asian states, India, South Korea, Japan, China) now squarely tie both the West and East, Asia and Europe, the Global North and the Global South, to the Gulf sub-region within the Middle East. The monarchies of the Gulf have together become a geopolitical “pivot point” in the globalizing order. It is therefore no surprise that Saudi Arabia refuses to either deify or vilify any particular regional neighbor or more distant middle or rising power, because to do so would be to undermine its very status as an underwriter of the global energy order. Most recently, the global financial crisis has made the G20 suddenly very important—and Turkey and Saudi Arabia are founding original members. As argued by the open-source, private intelligence service *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, in regard to the recent G20 summit of heads of state:

The world's eyes have fallen on Saudi Arabia and China, two countries faring relatively well amid the global crisis, each of which possesses an enviable near-\$2 trillion in foreign exchange reserves and assorted national accounts. Together, these two could give a big boost to the IMF's resources, and both have suggested that they may announce contributions while attending the G-20 summit. Yet both countries expect to get something in return beyond the interest on their loans.

If they are to contribute more money to the fund, the Chinese and Saudis want their quotas lifted and greater voting representation. Currently, the Chinese are ranked seventh, with 3.72 percent of total SDRs and 3.66 percent of votes. By contrast, Germany, the economy of which the Chinese overtook in 2008 in terms of gross domestic product, has 5.99 percent of SDRs and 5.88 percent of votes. Meanwhile, the Saudis are ranked ninth, with 3.21 percent of SDRs and 3.16 percent of votes. High-level Chinese officials have hinted that Beijing could give as much as \$100 billion more to the fund, and Saudi officials have vacillated about giving the same amount—but both countries have made such donations contingent upon adjustments within the IMF's structure of executive power.^[1]

What is remarkable about this small piece of analysis is that *Saudi Arabia is not referred to as an “Arab” or “Middle East” state, but rather, as a globalizing energy and financial power that is structurally similar, in some ways, to the rising Asian regional hegemon, China.*

So in addition to the usual sub-regional divides and trends, there are also global trends in terms of rising powers that, rather than undermining sub-regional cleavages, actually serve to exacerbate or define them even more starkly. To use the language of comparative politics, global and sub-regional trends represent “reinforcing cleavages” that divide the Greater Middle East rather than “cross-cutting cleavages” that might bind this region together.

Put another way, there is no credible middle-to-rising power “pole” in North Africa or the Levant, a reality shown starkly in the global, social-science-based “Failed State Index” that is updated annually by the U.S. Fund for Peace.^[2] This index, rather than being based on area expertise, is instead functionally global in nature, not discriminating between countries as diverse as Somalia, Afghanistan, the Congo, Lebanon, Burma, or Syria. Notably, the Index uses universal statistical indicators concerning overall rule-of-law, including such variables as transparent political institutions, socio-economic equity, respect for human rights, retention and creation of human capital, minority rights (both political and economical), demographic stability, control of corruption, cooperative inter-elite politics, economic growth, and finally, independence from malign influence by an external party, whether that negative influence is defined as overweening dependence and clientilism or as endemic vulnerability to conflict-inducing, parochial interests by machiavellian neighbors.

How do Gulf sub-regional states compare to the Levant and Maghreb on this scale? In the Maghreb, Sudan and Chad rank at no. 2 and no. 4, respectively, even while some North African colleagues fare better (Libya, for example, now sits at an enviable no. 111). Bridging the Levant and Maghreb, the once dominant Arab nationalist power of Egypt sits at a middling-low ranking of 40, reflecting the dynamics described above—i.e., repression of the main domestic populist parties (especially political Islamic in character) alongside an ailing and moribund post-communist, statist bureaucracy and a clientilist relationship with an external patron (the United States) based on a rigid adherence to peace accords that are no longer popular with the Arab street.

Syria sits at a dangerous (and perhaps surprising) tipping point of no. 35, reflecting the same problem with a moribund, corrupt, all-controlling bureaucracy that stifles economic progress and political dissent, even as it also remains mired in the civil conflicts that define this sub-region. Lebanon sits at an even more miserable 18. Only Jordan as a Levant state stands out as semi-stable and semi-prosperous, with a ranking of 82; but, one should keep in mind that this rating is based on huge influxes of aid from international organizations (IMF, World Bank, OECD); petrodollars and worker remittances from the Gulf; and from Western bilateral supporters such as the United States and the UK—all tied to continued policies of rapprochement with a Westernized state (Israel) that is extremely unpopular within its own region.

And in all of these rankings, one should also keep in mind the inability of these Levant states to insulate themselves from intense trans-border ideological, ethnic, and nationalist cleavages, all of them being centrally affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict despite attempts to break away and globalize. This is important because it makes the Levant actually more similar, in comparative social scientific and empirical terms, to the Great Lakes conflict sub-region of Africa, encompassing states like the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, and others, where state stability and identity cannot be separated from raging civil warfare both within and across formal boundaries. Likewise, it makes the Levant more comparable to the amorphous conflict region of “AfPak,” the term now used to define the diplomatic remit of Presidential envoy Richard Holbrooke, constituting a “conflict region” that encompasses Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of India (as reflected, for example, in the Mumbai terrorist attacks launched from Karachi in November 2008).

In stark contrast, even while Gulf Arab populations remain ideologically and emotionally tied up in the Palestinian plight, the leaders of Gulf Arab Oil Monarchies, as well as Turkey, have managed adroitly to “insulate” themselves from the failed state status of Iraq (ranked no. 5 on the USFP list), the troubled history of Yemen (ranked no. 21), while also remaining geopolitically focused on

balanced but cautious relations with their eastern and southeastern flanks (Iran, South Asia). Notably, the GCC monarchies, as with Turkey, seem to have adopted both an inter-regional and intra-regional Grand Strategy of “No Absolute Enemies,” even in regard to the perceived strategic threats from Persian-nationalist Iran.^[3]

Overall, GCC states remain focused on global energy and financial equations as much as the civil turmoils of the Greater Middle East. This “encapsulated status” of the GCC rests on several pillars, including their oil economies; their sparser populations (making them less prone to food, water, and poverty crises); their strong bilateral defense pacts with the global Superpower; their geographic distance from the Israeli-Arab dispute; and their original founding status as deal-making coastal tribal coalitions that dealt with first the UK, then America, as relatively equal and respected sovereign negotiators (rather than totally subjugated and occupied colonies such as Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon).

And their rankings on the global USFP Index reflects this sub-regional-cum-global geopolitical reality: Saudi Arabia (no. 84); Kuwait (no. 126); Bahrain (no. 134); Qatar (no. 137); the UAE (no. 138); and Oman (no. 146). And this points to the reason why the “snub” at the airport for Jordan was so important at the eve of the recent Arab Summit: Jordan was originally hoping many years ago to be a founding member of the GCC; to be defined as much by Gulf geopolitics (both domestic and international) as much as Levant. The fact that Jordan was not admitted, and still is not, is now geopolitically important—specifically, as the Gulf grows, GCC membership, based on the politics of tribal monarchies, becomes more important. In the absence of formal membership, Jordan is looking for informal, normative support as “one of the club.” At the airport in Doha, Jordan did not get this support, and hence the curt diplomatic response.

In conclusion: the simultaneous globalizing pressures of rising powers and fragile/failing states has pervaded this region, as with any other region of the globe. Specifically, the increasingly “multipolar world order,” represented by the phenomenon of rising powers, has scooped up Turkey and Saudi Arabia and placed them squarely in the middle of global issues such as energy, food, and financial security. Meanwhile, the “non-polar order” of civil conflicts and underdevelopment have pushed the Levant and parts of the Maghreb ever-downward. These opposing global tectonic shifts have simply reinforced the already existing sub-regional geopolitical cleavages described above, guaranteeing a future of Middle East disunity and failed Arab summitry.

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References

1. See "[China, Saudi Arabia, and the IMF Quota and Voting System](#)," *Stratfor Today*, March 31, 2009.
2. Click the following direct link for the full index of ranked states: [Fund for Peace](#).
3. See for instance Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, and Robert A. Guffey, [Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy](#), RAND Monograph Series (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009).